

The Netherlands

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In recent years, the number of Islamic butchers has been growing at an increasing rate. This brings a few problems with it. Not only are there Dutch regulations for butchers, Muslims also have their own requirements for the meat that they buy.

The overall number of butchers in the Netherlands has steadily declined in the last years. Whereas in 1990 there were still 5,300 registered with the professional association of butchers in Rijswijk, by the end of last year this number had dwindled to 4,500. Yet remarkably in recent years the proportion of Muslim butchers has risen sharply. At the end of last year, the butchers' association had 490 Islamic butchers registered with it – twice as many as four years ago. By the end of June this year, this number had already risen to 523. 'I'm sure that there are still a few hundred missing from our books,' says A.L. Moerman, the association's spokesman.

The vigour which Islamic butchers show in establishing themselves is matched by the worries that the association has about this 'subsector'. In Islamic circles, attempts are also being made to keep a sharp eye on the way Islamic butchers practise their trade. The association is concerned about whether the butchers work competently, observing hygiene and safety rules, as well as acting in an economically responsible manner.

Of paramount importance to the Muslim community is that it is ensured of the religious side of the business. The meat must be approved as 'halal'. But, random samples and surveys of everyday practice indicate that there is no effective check. This means that many Muslims, confident that they are eating halal food, are, in fact, eating food which is 'haram', forbidden by Allah. 'Quite often we receive signals that the rules are being taken with a grain of salt,' says Abdul Qayyoem, chairman of the Halal Food and Foodstuffs association (HVV), based in The Hague, which runs its own inspection service.

Even in the 1960s, the specific position of the Islamic butcher was already a bone of contention, which had raised its head after Dutch companies began the large-scale recruitment of guest-workers from countries such as Turkey and Morocco.

As early as 1967, a Moroccan butcher had already started a business in Utrecht. In the same year, another settled in Amsterdam. These first Islamic butchers had no official papers and worked in rooms which bore little resemblance to a butcher's shop. Until 1969, when he was able to rent a shop, the butcher in Utrecht worked in a garage. Ritual slaughtering took place without a permit. It was not until between 1975 and 1977 that a small number of butchers obtained a special permit. Chamber of Commerce figures show that these pioneers were mostly Moroccan, and that Utrecht was the most important retail centre. From their bases here, these fairly wealthy butchers established branches throughout the country. Most of these butchers had enough money to invest and almost all of them came from the cities of Tétouan and Nador in the north of Morocco.

These butchers did extraordinarily well. Among them were entrepreneurs with a turnover of ten to twenty thousand guilders per week. Their customers stood in long queues in front of the door. This is also not surprising since Muslims in the Netherlands are relatively big meat-eaters. Last year for example, according to estimates, the ethnic minorities accounted for ten percent of the total purchases of meat in the Netherlands.

In the first half of the 1970s, despite a constantly rising demand for ritually slaughtered meat, the number of butchers with a permit remained at 33. Those who wanted to begin faced a number of problems. In order to complete formalities such as legal requirements, it

was necessary to obtain the advice of 'a pioneer' – in other words, a competitor. Besides this it was difficult to raise starting capital and contacts also had to be established with abattoirs and exporters of Moroccan foodstuffs in France and Belgium.

Turkish butchers lagged behind their Moroccan counterparts for a long time. In 1974 there were eight Turkish butchers in the four big cities compared with 22 Moroccan ones. Surinamese butchers appeared even later. For instance, although the first Moroccan butcher started in Utrecht in 1967, his first Turkish colleague did not follow suit until 1974 and the first Surinamese only came on the scene in 1980.

That the number of Islamic butchers has now risen to 523 or perhaps even higher, is ineluctably linked the fact that the number of Dutch Muslims now totals an estimated 800,000 to 1,000,000.

Nowadays, the Islamic butcher is required to have a professional diploma and be registered with the butchers' association, to which he must pay an annual contribution of more than a hundred guilders. 'Actually, it's quite simple,' says Moerman. 'Even though there is wide diversification – they often sell vegetables, dates, olives, herbs, tableware, bread, and household goods as well – if his business involves jointing meat, he must be a butcher and must satisfy the technical and hygienic requirements.'

'It can happen that someone sometimes registers himself and says that he completed his training in, say, Ankara. In a case like that, we ask him to 'hone a knife', as we call it – in other words, to sharpen it. This is a simple check because it is done in the same way all over the world. If he cannot do this, you can be pretty sure he is not telling the truth.'

'It is also extremely important that he works according to the HACCP code. This is a hygiene directive drawn up in Brussels for various sorts of businesses-like hotels and restaurants and the fish trade. HACCP stands for *Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points*. Since 1 January 1997, every butcher is required by law to work in accordance with this food-safety system.'

Moerman says that, in the case of a number of Islamic butchers, it is not only the hygiene aspect that is worrying, it is also the way they manage their business. 'They often do not do their sums properly and then operate with far too low a profit margin. Usually, a business like that doesn't last long. To some extent, the roots of this problem lie in the clientele; their customers are quick to find their way to the cheapest shop.'

This is the reason why supermarkets have not yet seized upon that market segment en masse. Of course, a million Muslims represent a lucrative market but supermarkets are not interested in going to so much trouble for such a minimal profit margin.'

'These profit margins are often crippling for the Islamic butchers as well, and they soon lead to bankruptcy. The situation also creates friction between the butchers. While one of them has his professional diploma and works according to

the HACCP code, he has to compete with neighbouring 'colleagues' whose businesses are absolutely not above board. That is not good at all.'

Abdul Qayyoem has concerns of a different nature. He is Surinamese by birth, originally a chemist, and is now chairman of the HVV Association as well as chairman of the Dutch Muslim Information Centre.

'In 1972, we started talking about a federation of Muslims that could represent a point of reference to which the government could turn. At the time, there were about fifty organizations active on behalf of the group then known as guest-workers. This federation – the Dutch Federation of Muslim Organizations – was founded in 1975. At the time, we had regular discussions with the Permanent Parliamentary Commission for Culture, Recreation, and Social Welfare about the problem of Islamic butchers, and other related matters.'

'In 1980, ethnicity began to raise its head once more and the whole thing fell apart. We then carried on with the Dutch Muslim Information Centre in order to maintain the dialogue regarding education, training, integration, Islamic festivals, and activities. By 1987, there seemed to be a tangible demand for a sort of 'halal certification', by which we mean that food and foodstuffs are certified pure, in accordance with the requirements of the Koran.'

'Of course there was nothing we could do – we are not a police organization. But finally, in 1994, the HVV association was set up and this has an autonomous inspection department. The association also has a 'fatwa council' consisting of five *muftis*.' The muftis also instruct the inspection department, which consists of ten men, about all sorts of questions regarding slaughtering and foodstuff problems for Muslims. Actually, ten inspectors is far too few. We should have a hundred, but let me hasten to add that I would also be very satisfied with thirty.'

The inspectors supervise ritual slaughtering, and inspect the way the meat is processed but also, for example, supervise the composition of baby-food sold in shops. 'For instance, recently it turned out that low-fat vegetable margarines contain gelatines derived from offal that serve as a binding agent. They also occur in desserts, ice cream, sweets, and medicines for example. This is absolutely forbidden to Muslims. So the inspectors do not restrict themselves to inspecting meat. We would also like to have our own laboratory where we could investigate the ingredients present in all sorts of foodstuffs.'

The association's inspectors have no formal authority. 'It is a sort of gentlemen's agreement that they can visit a butcher's shop with a view to certifying it. Their findings are announced in the mosque. That can be a source of annoyance for certain butchers. All the same, we do not go into the matter with them,' says Qayyoem.

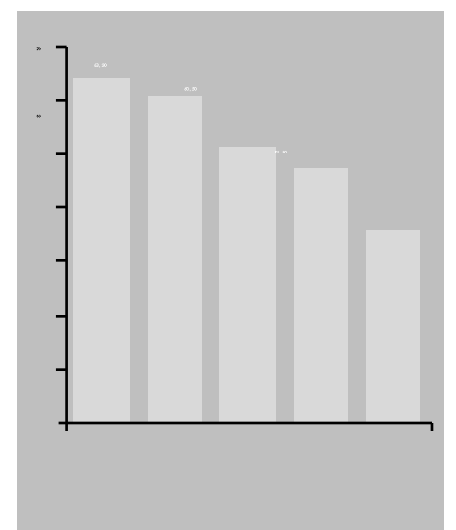
Moerman points out that meat is also sold in mosques – a trade which takes place completely hidden from sight of the Inspection Department – but, according to Qayyoem, this trade is extremely limited.

If Islamic butchers knowingly sell meat that is not 'halal', they are committing a grave sin, says Qayyoem. 'Every Muslim knows this. But we do not have the authority to force someone to close his shop.' 'The eating of pork is absolutely forbidden,' says Qayyoem. 'But then nor is beef allowed just like that. That would be putting it too simply. There are also requirements set for the slaughtering of beef cattle. The slaughtering must be accompanied by the prayers of a 'true Muslim' who doesn't necessarily have to be an imam. The slaughter should also be supervised by people who have been approved by the HVV Association.'

A butcher who sells meat according to the requirements does not necessarily have a 'halal' shop, says Qayyoem. 'You sometimes see – mostly with Turkish butchers – that they also sell alcoholic drinks such as beer. According to Islamic law this is a grave sin. In fact, you could also say that a butcher like that is not a true Muslim.' ♦

Turks Buy the Most Meat

Purchases of meat in kilos per person household (incl. cooked meats)



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Bram Pols is a journalist for the daily NRC Handelsblad.

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